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ABSTRACT

There is a need to go beyond English as a Second Language training for the Hmong and Mien living in the United States. Although the two groups are generally lumped together with other Southeast Asian refugee groups, they exhibit cultural and political differences which must be recognized by agencies serving them. The Hmong and Mien refugees lived in the mountains of Laos and are unfamiliar with 20th century technology. Their skills are as farmers, blacksmiths, or soldiers. They do not understand Western medical practices or the basis of a cash economy. Modern conveniences such as stoves, ovens, and refrigerators were unknown to them before they arrived here. If they are to adjust to the American life style, they need help not only with the language but also with basic skills such as home management, consumer dealings, health care practices, and vocational training. California's Competency Based Adult Education Program, which includes life skills training in its English curriculum, is a step in the right direction. So are culturally sensitive organizations such as the Lao Family Community and the Fixed Income Consumer Council in the Sacramento area, both of which assist this country's newest residents in adjusting to the American way of life. (CMG)

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The Hmong and Mien: Beyond ESOL Training Programs

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ABSTRACT

The Hmong and Mien:
Beyond ESOL Training Programs

This paper shows how English to Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes are inadequate in preparing the Hmong and Mien in adjusting to an American lifestyle. The Hmong and Mien are two small tribal groups from the mountains of Laos. Arriving from their homelands, the Hmong and Mien are ill-prepared to deal with a technological, twentieth century society that we as Americans take for granted. The Hmong and Mien face different problems than other "refugee" groups who have settled in the United States in recent years. This paper will show that service agencies will better serve its clients (refugees), if it has more cross-cultural information and is culturally sensitive to its clients.

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The Hmong and Mien:
Beyond ESOL Training Programs

This paper shows how English to Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) classes are inadequate for preparing the Hmong and Mien in adjusting to an American lifestyle. The Hmong and Mien are two small tribal groups from the mountains of Laos who are confronted with a technological civilization beyond their imagination in the environment of origin. This paper illustrates how cross-cultural information and cultural sensitivity are necessary ingredients for social service agencies to better serve not only the Hmong and Mien but also other refugee groups who reside in the United States. The Hmong and Mien are given refugee status by the United States government, and are lumped together with other Southeast Asian groups, they exhibit cultural and political differences which need recognition by those agencies which service them. The Hmong and Mien face different problems in adjusting to the American lifestyle.

Since 1975, people from different parts of Southeast Asia were forced to flee oppressive conditions in their homelands. Because of the United States involvement in the Vietnam War, the United States government granted refugee status to many of the people so they could settle in this country. To assist them in creating a new life in the United States, the government promised Southeast Asian refugees 1) money, 2) a place to live, 3) vocational training, 4) job search skills, 5) language training, and finally Americanization classes.

In an attempt to aid the refugees in adapting to an American

life, communities, private agencies, school districts, religious groups and colleges throughout the country opened up "Refugee Assistance Programs". Major funding sources for the "Refugee Assistance Programs" came from the federal, state, and local governments. Sometimes churches or private businesses have funded programs.

Originally, agencies were funded for ESOL, Vocational English as a Second Language (VESL), vocational skills training, and employment services. Since 1979, however, most displaced persons entering vocational skills training, and VESL were non-English or limited-English proficient, meaning they could not read, write or speak English. Therefore, agencies concentrated on the traditional English lessons of grammar, reading, writing, and speaking and less on vocational skills training and VESL, reasoning that a person who cannot speak English will not be able to find a job. As we all know, employers will not hire anyone without experience or proper skills. Unfortunately, the focus of most social service agencies has been on ESOL, with many agencies dropping the vocational skills training and VESL.

Part of the problem stems from the United States government's failure to recognize cultural and political differences among the Southeast Asians. Essentially, all the people from Southeast Asia are categorized into one groups known as Indochinese. Among the Indochinese, however, are people from Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea (Cambodia), and Thailand. Further, within each country, there are many different ethnic groups, such as the Hmong and Mien of Laos. Since governmental guidelines, which is the major funding source, are written for "Indochinese Refugees," the

agencies receiving funds write proposal based on the government's categories, i.e., lumping "refugees" together, thus perpetuating the ignorance concerning the different Southeast Asian ethnic groups. The Hmong and Mien are unidentified and remain ignored because they become part of the larger Southeast Asian population.

The Hmong and Mien are rural people who lived in the mountains of Laos are unfamilar with twentieth century technology except those who know of modern day weapons of war. As Micheal Blair of the Indochinese Refugee Assistance Program in Sacramento, California, said, "there were no taxes, no licenses. They made their own houses. In Laos, if you give a man an ax, a horse and sore seeds, he will care for his family."[1] The Hmong and Mien lifeskills are different from ours. Blair further points out that the Hmong and Mien remind him of "the American poineers of 150 years age...most are skilled farmers or blacksmiths or soldiers, these skills are not considered marketable here."[2]

Many of the lifeskills the Hmong and Mien bring with them from Laos are not transferable for living in America. For instance, the Hmong and Mien in the mountains of Laos would go to a shaman for medical attention or even mental health problems. A shaman can remove a spell or rid a person of an evil spirit thus creating or maintaining a mentally healthy patient. Some Hmong and Mien in America refuse to see western medical doctors. In some instances, Hmong and Mien parents refuse to allow their children to see western doctors. In cases of minors needing medical attention, child protective agencies intervene with the aid of local law enforcement personnel to see that proper western medical practices are given to the children. Therefore,

the importance of western medical practices should be made aware of to the Hmong and Mien.

Another example of different lifeskills is the non-existence of a cash economy in the mountains of Laos. If people could not grow, raise, or make what they needed, then they bartered for it. So, the idea of comparative shopping is new. In Laos, if prices were too high, a person would bargain for a better deal, not go to another store for a lower price. Since it was a non-cash based economy in Laos, the idea of paper or currency having worth is a new concept. When shopping in a store, some Hmong or Mien person would take out all of their currency just to buy a small item, making them an easy mark for a mugging.

Another lifeskill difference was discovered recently by an ESOL teacher in California. This teacher found a lesson of giving directions on how to get from one place to another more diffcult than usual for the Hmong and Mien students to comprehend. This teacher soon realized that there were no such things as streets or blocks in the mountains of Laos. So, for this particular lesson, the teacher had to start over, using the classroom as a model for a small community with chairs, desks, and tables as buildings, and the spaces between these objects as streets and blocks. Slowly, using this method the teacher was able to have the students give excellent directions.

Modern conveniences that Americans and even "refugees" from urban areas in their native countries are accustomed to may be new or unknown to the Hmong and Mien when they first arrived in the United States. Items such as a stove, oven, and refrigerator are strange to these people. Stories of when some

of the earlier Hmong and Mien "refugees" using a refrigerator as a china cabinet or when seeing a bathtub for the first time and thinking it was for cooking or seeing an oven and thinking it was a chicken coup were probably true.

For the Hmong and Mien, traditional ESOL classes are not enough to aid them in adjusting to the American lifestyle. Grammar, reading, writing, and speaking English provide just one aspect in creating a new lifestyle for the Hmong and Mien. There are other needs that should be addressed while the people are learning English in order to completely adapt to an American lifestyle, such as, home management, health care information, and vocational training. Just as the teacher in California discovered that ESOL lessons should be adapted to fit the Hmong and Mien, so must home management, health care information and vocational training.

There is a statewide effort in California's adult education system to implement Competency Based Adult Education (CBAE). CBAE means being competent in the lifeskills necessary to live in the United States. The idea of CBAE is to implement competency based education into its regular curriculum. What this means for foreign born students is that they learn some skills from medical information to operating home appliancies while studying English. What specific lifeskills should be taught to students are decided by teachers, students, and community members by means of meetings and/or surveys.

In the Sacramento Area, agencies have been set up in the community to help the Hmong and Mien. Two such agencies are the Lao Family Community and the Fixed Income Consumer Council (FICC).

The Lao Family Community is a private, non-profit organization, made up of volunteers, mostly Laotians, including Hmong and Mien. This organization helps non-English or limited-English proficient Laotian "refugees" with translations, making referrals to other agencies, provides tranportation for appointments, and provides translators to other agencies without any bilingual Hmong or Mien help. The Lao Family Community is also funded to provide health information to Laotians in their native languages. In addition health information for Laotians, the Lao Family Community is also funded to provide workshops to explain Laotian culture, especially folk medicines to western medical people and other service agencies which may not be culturally sensitive. FICC, funded by California's Department of Social Services is to provide consumer education and home management techniques to any low income people or groups of people living in the Sacramento area. A good portion of its case work includes the Hmong and Mien people, because they seem to have more adjustment problems than other refugee groups. In order to better serve its clients, FICC has hire bilingual staff workers.

I have pointed out that the Hmong and Mien face problems in adapting to the American lifestyle. Learning English is just one step in the ajustment process. Other avenues to consider include an introduction and explanation of western medical practices, consumer education, vocational training, and home management techniques. Competency Based Education along with culturally sensitive organizations such as the Lao Family Community and the Fixed Income Consumer Council are steps in the right direction to assist our most recent residents in adjusting to an American lifestyle.

Notes

[1]Cheryl Romo. "From the Mists of Time and Terror." Sacramento Magazine. (February 1984) 20.

[2]Ibid. 20.